

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN ERNST CASSIRER'S CONCEPTS OF SIGN/SYMBOL AND V. VOLOSHINOV'S CONCEPT OF "IDEOLOGICAL SIGN"

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- **ABSTRACT:** In recent years, many studies have been published on the influences and convergences between the thought of the so-called "Bakhtin Circle" and other contemporary authors of Russian authors M. Bakhtin, P. Medvedev and V. Voloshinov. In this sense, several researchers (Marchezan, 2019; Faraco, 2009; Grillo, 2017; Poole, 1998; Brandist, 2002, 1997; Lofts, 2016, 2000; Tihanov, 2002; Dop, 2001) have shown some convergences between the thinking of German philosopher Ernst Cassirer and the thinking of the aforementioned Russian authors, as well as the influences that Cassirer had on their theoretical construct. In this article, therefore, we propose a comparative analysis between concepts of "symbol/sign" developed by Cassirer and the concept of "sign" outlined by Voloshinov, pointing out similarities, differences, and possible influences of Cassirer on Voloshinov. Our path of analysis is guided by the search for "principles" or "key concepts" that can synthesize these mentioned concepts. We conclude that the idea defended by Voloshinov, which the different spheres (religion, art, politics, etc.) are linked to by their sign substrate, is directly influenced by Cassirerian theses. Also, the *representation* of semiotic systems, understood as the "pointing outside of one's self" of the concrete sign, which correlates at least two realities, is influenced by Cassirer's premises.
- **KEYWORDS:** Sign; *Marxism and Philosophy of Language*; Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

### Introduction

In recent years, many studies have been published on the contributions, influences, and convergences between the thought of the so-called "Bakhtin Circle" and other contemporary authors of the Russian thinkers M. Bakhtin, P. Medviédev and V. Voloshinov. In this sense, several researchers (Marchezan, 2019; Faraco, 2009; Grillo, 2017; Poole, 1998; Brandist, 1997, 2002, 2012; Lofts, 2000, 2016; Tihanov, 2002) have shown some convergences between the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer's thinking and the thought of the Russian authors mentioned above, as well as the influences that Cassirer had on their theoretical construct.

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Brandist (1997) points out that the concept of “sign” developed by Voloshinov in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Vološinov, 1973) is influenced by Cassirerian theses, but does not develop this idea, as it is not the focus of his article, whose central objective is to show the influence of Ernst Cassirer’s thought on Bakhtin’s theory of the novel.

In fact, Voloshinov cites volume 1 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Cassirer, 2001) at least four times in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* – and, as Grillo (2017) informs us, in the 1920s Voloshinov was working on the translation of Cassirer’s work into Russian, which reinforces the hypothesis that there were direct influences from the reading of Cassirer’s work on the theses developed in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

Therefore, in this article, we propose a comparative analysis between concepts of “symbol/sign” developed by Cassirer and the concept of “sign” outlined by Voloshinov, pointing out similarities, differences, and possible influences of Cassirer on Voloshinov.

Our path of analysis is guided by the search for “principles” or “key concepts” that can synthesize the aforementioned concepts. Therefore, to understand the Cassirerian symbol – and by extension, the sign – in the pages that follow, we will highlight the principles of creation as opposed to the mere reproduction of the world; the elevation of the individual to the universally valid; the sensitive-intelligible interrelationship; the representation. The concept of sign developed by Voloshinov, in turn, will be understood from representation, refraction, interaction, and material existence.

Our analyses are presented in two sections. In the section “The symbol/sign in Cassirer”, we will show how the concept of symbol/sign is constructed by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, highlighting the diversity of terminologies used by the author (signal, symbol, sign). We seek to discuss and differentiate the terms used in several of his works. Then, in the section “The Sign in Voloshinov”, we will discuss the particularities of the concept of “sign” presented by Voloshinov, comparing this concept with the Cassirerian symbol/sign. Final considerations are presented in the last section.

## **The symbol/sign in Cassirer**

At first, we consider it necessary to address the different terminologies used by Cassirer in his works: sign, symbol; “signal” and symbol. We will start with the signal/symbol distinction, to understand some general principles of the symbolism.

In *An essay on man*, Cassirer (1944) considers the symbol a key to understanding the nature of man, and constructs this term in opposition to the signal, typical of the animal world. There is a qualitative difference between signals and symbols, since the signals are necessarily linked to a physical being, and are also triggered by a concrete and present external stimulus. For example, an order, given to a trained animal, triggers a response – This response, the further we “descend” into the animal

kingdom, that is, the deeper we enter less complex forms of life, must be provoked by an increasingly concrete stimulus. Thus, in volume 3 of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms: phenomenology of knowledge*, Cassirer (1980), citing Bühler's studies, states that a bee, upon discovering the place where something is found, returns to the hive to gather companions there for a new flight. From then on, it gives each of the bees a sample of the nectar that she managed to gather in the indicated location. Human language, in turn, because it is a symbolic language – and not a language erected under signage – has the characteristic of *dematerialization*: we can “speak” about nectar, without needing material proof of it.

Beyond this concreteness, this necessary presence of a physical or substantial being, signals do not have mobility: their meaning always remains the same – nectar will always be understood as nectar; an order given to a trained animal will always be understood as a specific order. Symbols, in turn, have a mobile versatility of meaning since they are not directly linked to a physical or substantial being, so it acquires a *functional* value.

In the essays *Language and Art I* and *Language and Art II*, constants of *Symbol, Myth and Culture* (Cassirer, 1979), edited by the scholar of Cassirerian work, Donald Verene, and also in volume 3 of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms*, we find the difference between the animal world of “signage” and the human world of symbol with regard to objectification, the constitution of a constant world, a world of things and attributes. Cassirer (1979) cites the observations of Uexküll and other researchers, to show that the human symbolic experience is erected in a much more solid state, while the animal experience is based on a state of “liquefaction”.

The German philosopher cites the example provided by a physiologist regarding the feeding of a house spider, which is incapable of recognizing a fly if it is not attached to its web, to its trap – as if, for this being, there was no independent world of “things” disconnected from a context. Symbolism, on the other hand, creates a constant world of things, which “stand out” from the current of mere sensations and sensual impressions, stamping their seal of existence (Cassirer, 1957), and those things are no longer necessarily linked to a specific context to be recognized as such (like the fly, only recognized as a “fly” when present in the spider trap).

In summary, signals and symbols are distinguished by: having a substantial value, necessarily linking themselves to a physical being (signals), while symbols, instead of having a substantial value, have a functional value; not having mobility of meaning (signals), while symbols have this mobility; not being able to construct worlds of “things” disconnected from a specific context (signals), in opposition, therefore, to the world of symbolic “constancy”, a world of things and attributes that do not need to always be linked to the same context to be recognized.

Let us now move on to the terms *sign* and *symbol*. In the work *Language and myth*, the author (Cassirer, 1953), at times, uses the terms “sign” and “symbol” with an approximate meaning. Observe:

The significance of discursive thought lies entirely in this function. In this sense, it is something essentially ideal, a “sign” or symbol, the object of which is not a substantial entity but lies rather in the relations it establishes (Cassirer, 1953, p. 56).

In the highlighted excerpt, the author addresses the essence of theoretical thought, “discursive” thought, as opposed to mythical and linguistic thought. Cassirer (1953) defends the thesis that discursive thought is characterized by an “ideality” of existence, since it establishes signs or symbols that are not characterized by a substantial relationship, but a relational one.

In the first volume of the *Philosophy of symbolic forms: language* (Cassirer, 1980), we find the following expressions: *sign*, *symbol*, *symbolic sign*, and also *artificial symbolism* and *natural symbolism*. Careful reading is necessary to understand the subtleties of the concepts.

According to Porta (2011), it is necessary to understand the concept of “symbol” and the way in which this concept is related to the “sign” so that the concept of “symbolic form” can become more precise. The author (Porta, 2011) warns us that, when trying to understand these concepts, we should not correlate them with the usual definitions of Saussure, Morris, Peirce, etc., since the precise context of discussion and development of Cassirerian ideas happens in the “idealist theme of the matter-form relationship and in overcoming dualism” (Porta, 2011, p. 61, own translation).<sup>1</sup>

In fact, in the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Cassirer, 1980), we find the philosopher constructing his theses about symbolism and symbolic forms based on a critique of empiricism, which, in his reading, tends to emphasize matter, sensory data in a simplistic way, through vague and generic ideas such as “association”; and, at the same time, based on a critique of rationalism, which, in opposition to empiricism, would emphasize form and not matter. For the author, in rationalism the cause of the connection of the contents of consciousness is sought in an activity that is added to the different contents (Cassirer, 1980). The Cassirerian idealist “synthesis” conceives the symbol as a “form-matter” interrelationship, as we will discuss below.

For now, let us still focus on the distinction “symbol” and “sign”. Porta (2011) states that the concept of “symbol” is generic and it should be understood as the attribution of meaning to sensitive data. Signs, in turn, are particular cases of symbols, and conceived as “intersubjectively accessible sensitive substrates” that are conventional. Symbols, in turn, “are not just conventional” (Porta, 2011, p. 62, own translation).<sup>2</sup> According to this definition, every sign is a symbol, but the reverse is not true. In order to make this distinction clearer, let us analyze an excerpt from the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, when the author (Cassirer, 1980) mentions the difference between

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<sup>1</sup> Original: “o contexto preciso de discussão e desenvolvimento das ideias cassirerianas ocorre na “temática idealista da relação matéria-forma e da superação do dualismo” (Porta, 2011, p. 61).

<sup>2</sup> Original: “substratos sensíveis intersubjetivamente acessíveis” que são convencionais. Os símbolos, por seu turno, “não são somente convencionais” (Porta, 2011, p. 62).

natural symbolism (the “natural concept of the world”) and artificial symbolism, which occurs from “arbitrary” signs, that is, the signs of language, art, and myth, created by consciousness:

We must go back to **“natural” symbolism**, to that representation of consciousness as a whole which is necessarily contained or at least projected in every single moment and fragment of consciousness, if we wish to understand **the artificial symbols, the “arbitrary” signs** which consciousness creates in language, art, and myth. The force and effect of these **mediating signs** would remain a mystery if they were not ultimately rooted in an original spiritual process which belongs to the very essence of consciousness. We can understand how a sensuous particular, such as the spoken sound, can become the vehicle of a purely intellectual meaning, only if we assume **that the basic function of signification is present and active before the individual sign is produced**, so that this producing does not create signification, but merely stabilizes it, applies it to the particular case (Cassirer, 1980, p. 106-107, emphasis added).

In the excerpt above, the philosopher differentiates between natural symbolism (“the representation of consciousness as a whole”) and artificial symbolism, which manifests itself through arbitrary signs. Natural symbolism would refer, in volume 3 of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Cassirer, 1957), to what Cassirer calls a “natural vision of the world”. That is, a form of representation of consciousness focused on objectivity – it is about the world objective of “you” and “thing”, a world in which the *self* apprehends the existence of other subjects and the existence of objects external to us, in the form of simple expressive experience or in the form of perceptual experience (Cassirer, 1957). The natural vision of the world is symbolic, as objectivity is not simply “given”, or received, passively by man, but “conquered”, created, in a constant process of ordering the world, of constructing meanings for sensitive data, which are always “pre-figured” in advance by the pregnant meaning itself.

The natural worldview and, therefore, natural symbolism, underpins later scientific thought. In the natural view of the world, man is tied to “things”, to objectivity, but there is still no reflection on how this objectivity is constituted – or, at most, thought, when instigated on this objectivity, grasps rules of formation that are linked to the content, to the strict phenomenon. Theoretical thinking emerges from the moment when man questions the natural vision of the world and makes clear the rules of determination, which must then be confirmed in the intuitive sphere, detaching itself, however, from this sphere, as a new “organ”, a new symbolic system is created to explain the world.

Artificial symbolism consists of an ordered representation in the symbolism of myth, art, and language. This form of symbolism “merges” the function of signification with the significant content. In this form of symbolism, it is not possible to postulate

a first “being” that, in addition to this being, acquires a determined meaning, since all the being results from meaning. Observe:

Thus the “natural” symbolism which we have found embedded as a fundamental characteristic of consciousness is on the one hand utilized and retained, while on the other hand it is surpassed and refined. For in this “natural” symbolism, a certain partial content of consciousness, though distinct from the whole, retained the power to represent this whole and in so doing to reconstitute it in a sense. A present content possessed the power of evoking another content, which was not immediately given but merely conveyed by it. It is not the case, however, that **the symbolic signs which we encounter in language, myth, and art first “are” and then, beyond this “being,” achieve a certain meaning; their being arises from their signification. Their content subsists purely and wholly in the function of signification** (Cassirer, 1980, p. 106, emphasis added).

Note that, in the excerpt above, the author uses the expression “symbolic signs” not exactly in the sense that there would be “non-symbolic signs”, but as a synonym for “arbitrary signs” or “artificial symbolism”. The symbolism of art, language, and myth is established so that consciousness does not depend on the sensible substrate as a given – rather, consciousness itself can “creates” this sensible substrate (e.g., the phoneme, as an acoustic image, is something that consciousness itself creates). In natural symbolism, consciousness, in apprehending the whole in the particular, depends on the stimulus of the particular, which needs to be given; however, in artificial symbolism, “consciousness *creates* definite concrete sensory contents as an expression for definite complexes of meaning” (Cassirer, 1980, p. 106, emphasis in the original).

In short: all human experience is symbolic, as man needs to order the world and, therefore, attribute meaning to this world. The sensory data that comes to us from the world is “pregnant” with meaning – this matter/sense interrelationship is what constitutes the symbol. The symbol can be motivated (for example, any image, such as a landscape that comes into view, is symbolic, since the form of the vision itself is directed by a pregnant sense, but, in this direct vision of the landscape, there isn’t exactly an “artificially” constructed sense), or arbitrary. Signs (linguistic signs, artistic drawings, mythical images, etc.), in turn, are always arbitrary, as previously stated.

In our reading, we highlight four important points for understanding Cassirerian symbolism and, by extension, “symbolic signs”: the symbol as creation, active production, and not as a mere reproduction of the world; the symbol as a means of elevating the individual to the universally valid; the symbol as an interrelation between form (content) and sensitive matter; the symbol as representation. Let us observe each point.

Regarding the symbol as a creation, active production of meanings, in the opening pages of the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Cassirer, 1980), the

author says the Physics and Mathematics sciences “were first to gain a clear awareness of this symbolic character of their basic implements”. (Cassirer, 1980, p. 75). The philosopher cites the works of Heinrich Hertz and Helmholtz, stating that, although these natural science authors still speak in the language of the theory of reproduction of knowledge, they no longer demand a similarity between image and thing, since they understand that the concepts with which physics operates represent a pure logical relationship, a general intellectual condition, which does not presuppose identity with the “thing in itself”. In Cassirer’s review of the natural sciences, the author states that the concepts of physics are created by the logic of natural science, and thus, “are subordinate to the universal requirements of this logic” (Cassirer, 1980, p. 76). The object, in this conceptual system, “cannot be regarded as a naked thing in itself, independent of the essential categories of natural science” (Cassirer, 1980, p. 76).

Through this argument, Cassirer weaves the idea that knowledge has a symbolic, *creative* character, which does not consist of merely reproducing the world, but of actively creating this world. To support the thesis of the non-existence of a world of “pure objects in themselves” that knowledge would simply access, the author, still within the scope of science, postulates that if such a reality or such a “pure object” existed, we would then have a uniform science.

The author extends this argument to other ways of constructing “images” of the world (Cassirer, 1980). He also considers that art, language, and myth, as well as knowledge, are authentic forms of creation, of production of worlds, and none of them operate with the simple reproduction of something “given”, but with active creations, which are the fruits of the creative energy of the spirit.

An example, provided by the author, that we consider particularly interesting and simple to illustrate this creative character of the symbolic, is the artistic drawing: a drawing is never the mere reproduction of the sensitive data of vision. When painting or drawing a landscape, the artist is not merely reproducing what he sees in front of him, no matter how “realistic” that illustration may be – there is always an angle that is highlighted, a certain light that frames the figure, a point that receives prominence at the expense of another. Everything that was not considered in the painting, that was omitted – that which was “obscured” by the play of light and shadows, or that was not portrayed in the landscape – is also significant: the “value” of the drawing lies precisely in that which was deliberately omitted.

As with paintings, language has a symbolic (and therefore active and creative) character because languages are not simple copies of something previously given – if they were, argues Cassirer in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (Chapter III. “Language and science. Signs of things and signs of order”, Cassirer, 1957), we would have a single language or “universal linguistic” signs.

Observe the excerpt below:

In reality the analysis of language — particularly if it starts not from the mere particular of the word, but from the unity of the sentence —



shows that all linguistic expression, far from being a mere copy of the given world of sensation or intuition, possesses a definite independent character of “signification.” And the same relation applies to signs of the most diverse types and origins. **In a sense it can be said of them all that their value consists not so much in what they stabilize of the concrete, sensuous content, and its immediate factuality, as in the part of this immediate factuality which they suppress and pass over.** Similarly, artistic delineation becomes what it is and is distinguished from a mere mechanistic reproduction, only through what it omits from the “given” impression (Cassirer, 1980, p. 108, emphasis added).

Although Porta (2011) warns us that to analyze Cassirer we must “leave aside” associations with Saussure, Peirce, Morris, etc., comparisons are inevitable – the idea of “value” of signs, presented in the excerpt above, immediately reminds us of the term used by Saussure. But we highlight the differences: in Saussure, “value” refers to the signifier/signified relationship in the entire system; in Cassirer, we have an idea that seems extremely interesting to us: value as “lack” – the lack that signifies. This “lack”, this omitted “something” is significant and constitutive of symbolic systems, since, as no symbolism is a mere reproduction of something sensorially given, but a particular way of ordering, of “giving meaning” to that something, the way in which certain impressions were omitted or highlighted is not only particular to each symbolic system, but also enters the total constitution of meaning.

In *Language and myth*, the author (Cassirer, 1953) uses the metaphor of the spotlight to differentiate the peculiarities of meaning construction used by language, myth, and science. He states that science is a symbolic form that presents itself as a constant light that spreads uniformly, considering that a theory needs to encompass new objects not yet described in the conceptual system, but foreseen in the explanatory framework. On the other hand, language and myth function as a light that focuses on a specific point, while all others remain in “darkness” – in language, for example, only that which has been focused on by consciousness “exists”, received special attention, and therefore was “created” by the act of naming. The play of “light and shadows” is, therefore, at the genesis of the process of linguistic semiotization.

Also using the metaphor of light, in volume 1 of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, the author states that science, language, and art are not “mirrors” that would reflect certain images formed inside or outside. In his words: “they are not indifferent media, but rather the true sources of light, the prerequisite of vision, and the wellsprings of all formation”. (Cassirer, 1980, p. 93).

It is interesting to follow the metaphors used by the author (indeed, every metaphor is extremely important for analyzing the conceptual framework of a theory). In volume 3 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, the author uses the metaphor, coming from physics, of “refraction” and “degree of refraction” to define symbolic forms. Let us examine the excerpt:



When we designate language, myth, and art as “symbolic forms,” the term seems to imply that they are all modes of spiritual formation, going back to an ultimate, primal stratum of reality which is perceived in them only as through a foreign medium. It would seem as though we could apprehend reality only in the particularity of these forms, whence it follows that in these forms, reality is cloaked as well as revealed. The same basic functions which give the world of the spirit its determinacy, its imprint, its character, appear on the other side to be so many refractions which an intrinsically unitary and unique being undergoes as soon as it is perceived and assimilated by a “subject.” Seen from this standpoint, the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is nothing other than an attempt to assign to each of them, as it were, its own specific and peculiar index of refraction (Cassirer, 1957, p. 1).

In the excerpt above, the author resumes discussions already started in volume 1 of *Philosophy of symbolic forms* about symbolic forms as different modes of creative construction of worlds of meaning. He then states that his work “aspires to know the special nature of the various refracting media” (Cassirer, 1957, p. 1), and that, to this end, it is necessary to understand the specific laws of constitution of these forms of symbolization. The discussions held later focus on the impossibility of apprehending an “absolute unity”, a substantial “being in itself”.

Considering that the symbolic is something created and never merely reproduced, it becomes problematic to think of something previously “given” that would then be refracted by some form of symbolization. In fact, although Cassirer does not deny the existence of the “real” in itself (cf. Cassirer, 1979), this real cannot be conceived as something substantial, but functional, with symbolic forms being the means by which representations of this real are constructed. For Cassirer (1979, p. 195), man must interpret reality, make it coherent, understandable, and intelligible. Art, religion, science, and philosophy (that is, the different forms of symbolization) are the different paths of human activity that fulfill this task. The author concludes that all these symbolic forms are active and creative, but the meaning of “creation” falls not on the creation of a substantial thing but on a *representation* (or different “representations” according to the angle of refraction of the symbolic form in question) of the empirical world.

Also in the essay *Language and art II*, the author uses the same metaphor of the mirror and the refractive angle: “Each of these [angles] is a mirror of our human experience, which has its own angle of refraction” (Cassirer, 1979, p. 194). We infer that the “angle of refraction” that the author refers to in this essay and in volume 3 of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms* are the laws of creation of representations of the empirical world. Each symbolic form has its own laws of creation of these representations, which are not reducible to one another.

By creating these different representations, man elevates the individual to the universally valid, since he builds intersubjective forms of meaningful worlds. Therefore,

let us move on to the second point, enumerated above, about the symbolic (the symbolic as the elevation of the individual to the universal).

In the first volume of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms*, the philosopher names the different forms of symbolization (myth, art, language, etc.) as specific forms of objectification (Cassirer, 1980), considering that they can be understood as means of elevating the individual to the level of universally valid. By using this expression – “forms of objectification” – the author is claiming for art, language, and myth the same functions that are conferred to science, as discussed above: that is, not only science, or knowledge, is a way of elevating the particular to something universally valid, universally accessible – but also language, art, and myth fulfill this task.

This idea of “objectification” has nuances in meaning. First, adopting the more “anthropological” reading expressed in *An Essay on Man* (Cassirer, 1944), we can understand that, by means of the symbolic, man frees himself from the rigidity of the here-now, and is able to project his future experiences, and also significantly interpret his past experiences.

In a second sense, “objectivity” correlates with “universal validity”. Cassirer considers that symbolic forms have the same validity, in the sense that all these forms of symbolization not only cooperate for the construction of the human, but also in the sense that they all have the same objectivity. Porta (2011) argues that there are contradictions in this thesis, due to theoretical “confusions” in the concepts of “objectivity” and “validity” and the lack of a metatheory in the Cassirerian philosophical construct, regarding intersubjectivity. The author (Porta, 2011, p. 162) considers that the thesis of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms* contains “hermeneutic aporias”, resulting from an “inversion” of Kant’s transcendental philosophy.

In effect, there are unresolved questions in *The Philosophy of symbolic forms*,<sup>3</sup> and Porta’s (2011) criticisms are very pertinent. We highlight, however, that although the German philosopher does not in fact elaborate a metatheory of intersubjectivity, which could solve this problem regarding the universal validity of symbolic forms, in the work *The logic of the cultural sciences* (Cassirer, 2000), there is an interesting vision developed about human culture as an intersubjective world of engagement in common actions. Let us look at an excerpt from this work:

Thus, in *this* picture of human nature culture, we can find neither place nor home. Nevertheless, culture is also an “intersubjective world”; a world that does not exist in “me” but rather is necessarily accessible to all subjects, and in which they necessarily participate. But the form of this participation is totally different from that in the physical world. Instead of relating to the self, the same space-temporal cosmos of things,

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<sup>3</sup> One of these issues, according to Porta (2011), is the relationship between symbolic forms and the system of signs. Symbolic forms are, in one of their possible interpretations, systems of signs that create worlds of meaning. However, as Porta (2011) points out, there is no clarity in the Cassirerian theses about how this systematic relationship would occur, considering, for example, the mythical world.

subjects find themselves and join together in a common action (Cassirer, 2000, p. 74-75, emphasis in the original).

Culture, by being a symbolic medium, involves us not in the physical sense – it is not about being in the same space-time cosmos of things, as the author mentions in the excerpt above, but in the sense that we are engaged in common actions, in active exchanges through linguistic communication. The author argues, in the aforementioned work, that we all live in worlds of language, poetic figurations, plastic arts, religious upbringings, and beliefs – and it is through these worlds that we know ourselves and others, to the extent that we are engaged in common actions (for example, poetry only exists because the poet and the reader are engaged together in this “poetic” vision of the world through which they constitute themselves as subjects).

In this work – which follows the three dense volumes of symbolic forms – in a much more accessible language, Cassirer explains to us another nuance of meaning of the concept of “objectivity”. The word “dialogue” appears for the first time in it (“Study 2. The perception of the things and the perception of expression”) as a true “synthesis” between the “self”, the “other” and the objective world. Let us see:

In speaking and image formation, not only do the individual subjects share what they already possess, but it is only in this way that they first come to possess it. In every living and meaningful conversation, this feature can be made clear. It is never a question of mere communication, but of dialogue. [...] In question and answer the “I” and the “you” must be distinguished, not only to understand each other, but to understand themselves. Both aspects constantly intervene in one another. The thought of one partner is kindled by that of the other, and by virtue of this interaction they construct, through the medium of language, a “common world” of meaning for themselves (Cassirer, 2000, p. 53).

In the excerpt above, we have the idea of joint construction of an intersubjective world (a “common world” of meaning) through dialogue. It is interesting to note that, in the vision presented in the work, “dialogue” is not just exchange, but construction – I do not simply share what I already have with the other, but it is in exchange, communication and engagement in common actions, that I actually step into possession of something. In this process of dialogue, the “I” and “you” are constituted as they not only understand the other, but as they come to understand themselves. The world of culture can therefore be conceived as a great “dialogue”.

Seeing similarities between this (and other) ideas presented in the work *The logic of the cultural sciences* (Cassirer, 1980) and the thought of the Bakhtin Circle is inevitable. Particularly, in our reading, we see similarities between ideas presented in this work (Cassirer, 1980) and some theses in the essay *The problem of content, material, and form*, dated 1924 (Bakhtin, 1990). We believe that in this work, when dealing with the

specific modes of creation of the human sciences – the “cultural sciences” –, Cassirer (1980) expands theses previously presented in his publications; one of them is the concept that symbolic forms are functional modes of objectification and not substantial modes. In *The logic of the cultural sciences*, the concept of “function” is closer to “interrelationship”, “intersubjective construction” of common worlds of meaning, which is carried out by language, art, religion. Cultural forms elevate us from the individual to the objectively valid, constructing shared meanings and involving us in concrete actions. The author states that the “act” – understood as linguistic exchanges, artistic communications, investigative processes – is the true “synthesis”. The act is conceived as the means capable of elevating the individual to the universally valid and, at the same time, as a way by which subjects also come to constitute themselves. In this sense, there is no *a priori* “I” and “you”, a substantial “I” and “you” that only “communicate” – subjects become what they are once they actively participate in the cultural “dialogue”.

In summary, the thesis that the symbolic elevates the individual to the universally valid, in our reading, goes through nuances of meaning, ranging from the idea of universal validity, expressed in the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, until it arrives at an idea that we consider particularly interesting, constructed in *The logic of the cultural sciences* – and which, certainly, draws near to Bakhtinian thought – of “cultural communication” or “cultural dialogue” as the engagement of subjects in horizons of common meaning.

Let us now move on to the third principle of symbolism: the form-matter interrelationship, to understand Cassirerian symbolism.

In the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer (1980) seeks a “common element” when defining the concept of “symbolic forms” as modes of objectification through which all these forms must necessarily pass to constitute themselves. Therefore, he argues that all symbolic forms only configure themselves as such to the extent that they create for themselves a certain sensuous substratum (Cassirer, 1980) and that this substratum “is so essential that it sometimes seems to constitute the entire content, the true ‘meaning’ of these forms.” (Cassirer, 1980, p. 86). He exemplifies this idea of the essentiality of sensitive data as something that tends to “enclose” the intelligible from language, myth, and art.

The author defends the thesis of the sensuous substratum of symbolic forms, stating that the sign, as it is sensuous data, is the “comprehensive mediating element”, the “common” element between the different forms of symbolization. Although these forms are different in their constitution and in their ways of configuring reality, all of them do not exist only “in the mind” or “in the soul” of people (using an expression used by Bakhtin/Medvedev, 1985, and also by Voloshinov, 1973), since this spiritual content needs to be expressed in “sensory signs”.

Flores, Faraco, and Gomes (2022) see an influence on Voloshinov’s (1973) thinking in this Cassirerian thesis about the sign as a material, concrete phenomenon. The authors (Flores; Faraco; Gomes, 2022) conceive that the very idea of the ideological sign, in the

sense of ideology as a “cultural creation” (of art, myth, science, etc.), would have been influenced by Cassirerian thought. We agree with the authors about these observations; we also add that the sign nature in Cassirer has important peculiarities that distinguish it from the sign materiality addressed by Voloshinov (1973) – peculiarities that go beyond the obvious distinct orientations (idealist, in Cassirer, Marxist, in Voloshinov) of the German and Russian thinkers.

As mentioned previously, Porta (2011) emphasizes that, when analyzing Cassirerian philosophy, we must understand the context of production of his work. And this context, as Porta (2011) points out, is the overcoming of the form-matter duality. In fact, when we go through the entire first part of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms*, we see an effort by the German philosopher to overcome “dualities”, to conceive the processes of symbolization as “syntheses” between the self and the other, the objective and the subjective, the sensitive and the intelligible.

Regarding this last duality – sensitive, intelligible – when opposing empiricism, which tends to emphasize matter, and rationalism, which emphasizes form, Cassirer (1980) conceives the symbolic process as an interrelationship between these two poles, considering that the sense, the intelligible, needs to materialize in a sensorial form. The “symbol” (and also the sign, as a particularization of the symbol) is not the mere concretization of a meaning but represents the “synthesis” of a meaning that pre-configures the way in which we receive sensitive data. The author exemplifies this thesis based on the analysis of the relationships of space, time, and thing/attribute. For example, one cannot simply assert that the mere succession of certain impressions, of certain sensitive stimuli, configures the idea of time, if the idea of “order” were not already contained in each specific stimulus. In this example, it is not a question of sensitive data that, once received, begins, *a posteriori*, to have a certain meaning, but of a “pregnant” meaning, of an interspersed meaning, intrinsic in each sensitive data, which configures the way we perceive this sensitive data.

In the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, the author (Cassirer, 1957, p. 202) defines the concept of “symbolic pregnancy” as being “the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain non-intuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely represents”. This concept “synthesizes” the form-matter relationship of symbolic processes, as it proposes a primary interrelationship between sensitive data and intelligible data.

Finally, let us analyze the last principle related to symbolic processes – the relationship between the symbol and consciousness in *representation*.

We must point out that the symbolic sign is linked to the functioning of consciousness, so that the author, when dealing with this “world of symbolic signs”, focuses on the way in which our consciousness is constituted. This, as the philosopher highlights, needs signs to be performed:

For consciousness, **the sign is, as it were, the first stage and the first demonstration of objectivity**, because through it the constant flux of

the contents of consciousness is for the first time halted, because in it something enduring is determined and emphasized (Cassirer, 1980, p. 89, emphasis added).

We have seen that the particular of consciousness “exists” only in so far as it potentially contains the whole and is, as it were, in constant transition towards the whole. **But the use of the sign liberates this potentiality and enables it to become true actuality. (...) In positing the sign, consciousness detaches itself more and more from the direct substratum of sensation and sensory intuition;** but precisely therein it reveals its inherent, original power of synthesis and unification (Cassirer, 1980, p. 108, emphasis added).

The sign, as can be seen from the excerpt above, is responsible for what Cassirer calls the “*process of objectification*” in *Language and Art II* (Cassirer, 1979) – the great, continuous and uninterrupted process through which the human world is constructed, through the establishment of certain nodal centers and the dissipation of the initial chaos of organic life. The fixation of things and attributes, the ordering of the world in relationships of space, time, and causality are the result of this process of objectification, which always occurs through the “use of the sign” (Cassirer, 1980). The “sign” or “symbolic sign”, in this view, allows us to construct our reality and “presents” us with a new mental state, as we also become aware of reality (Cassirer, 1979).

This sign/symbolic world, which makes consciousness possible, in Cassirer’s view does not, however, imply the postulation of a metaphysics of “consciousness in general”. As he himself points out, the philosopher’s reflections focus on concrete phenomena, since it is from the observation of these phenomena that we can derive the laws of functioning of each specific symbolic form (for example, the laws of the functioning of language as symbolic form can only be grasped based on observation, on the analysis of language – therefore, from the phenomenon). At this point, the author criticizes more radical idealism. In the essay *Language and art II* (Cassirer, 1979), we find the German philosopher concerned about this vision that the reader might perhaps have about his philosophy. That is, a probable idea that his theses would center on the postulation of a system of subjective idealism in which a subjective mind would be taken as the center and creator of the world. In response, the philosopher concludes this essay by stating that the individual mind cannot create reality, because what man creates is not a substantial “thing”, but rather the *representation* of the world, an objective description of the empirical world (Cassirer, 1979, p. 195).

“Representation” is, therefore, one of the keys to understanding Cassirerian symbolism, to understanding the active creation that the sign carries out. In the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer argues that “the representation of one content in and through another is an essential premise for the structure and formal unity of consciousness” (Cassirer, 1980, p. 105). He therefore understands representation

as the means through which a certain element is updated, actualized, through another one and, thus, something that “is not given” becomes present in the “given”.

The temporal relationship is used as an example of both representation and synthesis that all representation aims for, since, when we think about the “present”, the “now”, immediately when we intuit this now, we launch a bridge with a “not now”, with the past, and with the future. Now, the past and the future were not mentioned when we intuited the present; However, the simple “existence” of “now” cannot be achieved without this bridge with what happened before and with what is forthcoming. In this sense, we can say that the present “brings within itself”, updates the past and the future, *represents* this temporal bridge. Therefore, something that “is not yet” (the future) and something not given, something that “is not” (the past and the future “are not”) become “possible”.

All symbolism is based on representation. A linguistic sign, such as a word, for example, is representative, since, through what is given “here and now”, the phonetic sound, another non-present thing is represented, “something that is not there” (“is” not in the physical sense): the object. In this sense, the word is embodied by the sensitive substrate, but it also surpasses the sensitive by pointing to the concept: “a particular sensory content, without ceasing to be such, acquires the power to represent a universal for consciousness” (Cassirer, 1980, p. 110). That is, the word, a phonetic linguistic sign, without ceasing to be that “sound” that presents itself to consciousness, becomes, at the same time, “something more”, an “other thing”, since it points to a universally valid concept.

The core of representation lies in the “need to omit” (Cassirer, 1957), that is, in the impossibility of reproducing each particular thing and apprehending it immediately. Consciousness, according to Cassirer (1957), cannot dedicate itself with the same intensity to the specific sensory impressions that take over it. Therefore, consciousness creates a way of schematizing, of creating global images within which “a large number of contents” are found. And, in the same way that it omits, consciousness also “focuses” and intensifies certain impressions, ignoring others. Therefore, representation is active and creative and never passive and reproductive.

It is interesting to observe how Cassirer points out that this representative character of the sign/symbol gives it ambiguity. In the chapter “Thing and Attribute”, contained in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, when discussing the optical phenomenon of color, the philosopher states that, when we take color not in its “in itself”, but as a means of representation, that is, as a symbol, it becomes “ambiguous” as any symbol necessarily is, because of its nature. (Cassirer, 1957). This ambiguity concerns the fact that the same particular phenomenon can take on different meanings, depending on the context. Thus, a word cannot be interpreted in its “in itself”, but related to a sentence, to a text.

In the constant transformation and evolution of symbolism, there is a “struggle” against this ambiguity. Science is a symbolic form (the last form to be constituted, since myth and language are primeval forms of symbolization) that continues the intellectual



work begun in language – the work of *dissociating* the context and *dematerializing* the sign. But, in this process, science takes a step forward in relation to language, as the phonetic sign is, in a way, still tied to intuition and, therefore, still riddled with ambiguity of meaning. The scientific sign of the abstract formula, on the other hand, “frees itself” completely from intuition and the sphere of things, and then becomes a “pure sign of relationship and order” (Cassirer, 1957) – a sign that is no longer focused on something particular to be represented or designated, such as linguistic signs, but focused on establishing pure relationships within an ordered system. The *logos*, present in language, but still limited by its link to intuition, triumphs in scientific signs: “It is the same ‘logos’ that was effective in language formation from the very first, [...] which passes from its implicit to its explicit form.” (Cassirer, 1957, p. 334).

Symbolism, as a result of representation – as a result of global schemes that condense a large amount of content, which bring the “multiple into one” – implies *connection*. Let us observe the author’s words:

Thus, this process shows from a new angle how the analysis of consciousness can never lead back to absolute elements: it is precisely the pure relation which governs the building of consciousness, and which stands out in it as a genuine a priori, an essentially first factor. It is only in the reciprocal movement between the “representing” and the “represented” that a knowledge of the ego and of objects, ideal as well as real, can arise. **Here we feel the true pulse of consciousness, whose secret is precisely that every beat strikes a thousand connections** (Cassirer, 1957, p. 202-203, emphasis added).

Connection implies transformation, movement, since sign “does not reflect a fixed content of consciousness but defines the direction of such a general movement.” (Cassirer, 1980, p. 109). This movement guideline, the path that must be followed in the symbolization process, is defined by the symbolic form that conditions the sign: art, science, myth, etc.

In summary, as we highlighted, “symbol” is a broad concept – attribution of meaning to a sensitive given – and “sign” is a particularization of the symbol. As a particularization of symbols, signs obey the principles listed above (active creation and not mere reproduction; elevation of the individual to the universally valid; interrelationship or “synthesis” between the sensitive and the intelligible; representation). However, considering the idea of “movement”, of transformation, that involves the human world of senses, we feel more comfortable using the expression “processes of symbolization” at various points in this text.

In the next topic, we will analyze the concept of “sign” developed by Voloshinov, pointing out the similarities and differences with the related concept presented by Cassirer.

## Sign in Voloshinov

In the work *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, Voloshinov defends the thesis of the productive role and social nature of utterance (Vološinov, 1973). To this end, in the first part of the work, its intention, as stated in the introduction, is to show the place of the problems of the philosophy of language within the unity of the Marxist worldview. This objective is achieved by the author when arguing that ideological products – art, literature, religion, morality, etc. – have a material, *semiotic* nature. Let us look at the excerpt below:

Within the domain of signs – i.e., within the ideological sphere – profound differences exist; it is, after all, the domain of the artistic image, the religious symbol, the scientific formula, and the judicial ruling, etc. Each field of ideological creativity has its own kind of orientation toward reality, and each refracts reality in its own way. Each field commands its own special function within the unity of social life. But it is *their semiotic character that fixes all ideological phenomena under the same general definition* (Vološinov, 1973, p. 10-11, emphasis in the original).

In the excerpt above, our attention is drawn to the statement that the “common trait” of all the different and multifaceted products of ideological creation is the sign character, due to the similarity of this statement with the excerpt in which Cassirer, in the first volume of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms* (Cassirer, 1980), argues that “sensory signs” constitute the intermediate element of symbolic forms. Observe the excerpt:

An escape from this methodological dilemma is possible only if we can discover a factor which recurs in each basic cultural form but in no two of them takes exactly the same shape. **Then, in reference to this principle, we might assert the ideal relation between the individual provinces – between the basic functions of language and cognition, of art and religion – without losing the incomparable particularity of any one of them** (Cassirer, 1980, p. 84, emphasis added).

The dilemma referred to by the author in the excerpt above concerns how to equate the specificity of each field of cultural creation – language, science, aesthetics, religion, etc. – with all of these same fields. Cassirer (1980) states that the “intermediate element”, that is, the “common feature” (here using the expression by Voloshinov) of these different fields are the “sensory signs” that they use. The fields of creation thus have a semiotic, material character.

In fact, Flores, Faraco, and Gomes (2022) see a direct influence of the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* in this idea developed by Voloshinov (*The*

*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* was being translated by Voloshinov into Russian, as Grillo, 2017, informs us). Tihanov (2000) also argues that there is an influence of volume I of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms* on the thesis of the semiotic nature of the “spheres”.

Obviously, Voloshinov develops his theses in line with Marxist premises, therefore opposing the idealism from which Cassirer stands. However, it is necessary to point out the moments in which his ideas about the sign are influenced by Cassirerian thought, so that we can understand the particularities of the theoretical construct elaborated by the Russian author. Thus, when pointing out that the different ideological fields have a material, semiotic character, Voloshinov (1973) relies on the Cassirerian thesis that this is the common trait that combines symbolic forms. However, we cannot properly assert that there is an equivalence between Cassirer’s “symbolic forms” and Voloshinov’s “ideological fields”. Symbolic forms are thought of as a totality of spiritual creation; ideological fields are conceived as the “superstructures” of intellectual creation, founded on the same base of economic production (thus following Marxist theses).

Another point in which we see a certain influence of Cassirerian thought in Voloshinov’s work is the moment when the author defines the sign based on the idea of “signification”, opposing this concept – the sign –, an ideological product to the “non sign”, non-semiotized reality. Let us see:

Any ideological product is not only itself a part of a reality (natural or social), just as is any physical body, any instrument of production, or any product for consumption, it also, in contradistinction to these other phenomena, reflects and refracts another reality outside itself. Everything ideological possesses *meaning*: it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself. In other words, it is a sign. *Without signs, there is no ideology* (Vološinov, 1973, p. 9, emphasis in the original).

In the excerpt above, we find one of the most cited statements in Voloshinov’s work, which correlates the sign with ideology (“*Without signs, there is no ideology*”). Nevertheless, we highlight another idea present in the fragment that seems essential to understanding semiotic phenomena – it is *representation*.

Notice that what distinguishes a sign from a “non-sign” reality is the fact that the latter “encloses itself within itself”; it is not capable of pointing to another reality. The sign, on the other hand, points out of itself, to “something found outside of itself”. Thus, a material, physical object, or an element of nature, as something not semiotized, encloses its meaning in its own material existence. A sign, however, “goes beyond” that material existence, pointing to another path, without ceasing to be linked to this material reality.

When distinguishing instruments of production and consumer products and sign products, Voloshinov shows how those, *a priori* without semiotic significance, can be transformed into signs, when other meanings are attributed to them. The “hammer and

sickle” is an emblematic example: they are, evidently, instruments of production in their primary reality. However, in the communist coat of arms, another meaning – a “second order” meaning – transforms these instruments of production into a sign.

This example shows us that the sign is *relational*; insofar as it is not closed within itself, it always correlates at least “two realities”. In the words of Voloshinov (1973, p. 28), signification – the fundamental element that defines the sign – “is the expression of a semiotic relationship between a particular piece of reality and another kind of reality that it stands for, represents, or depicts”.

The concept of “representation” as something “relational” reminds us of the idea of representation of symbolic products that is developed by Cassirer (1980). The German philosopher demonstrates how one content within the other and through the other constitutes the core of representation, illustrating this thesis through the relationships we construct of space, time, and thing/attribute, as discussed previously. It is worth highlighting that in this demonstration by Cassirer (1980), the idea that representation always *correlates* “two realities” is eminent: the representative and the represented. Thus, if we appropriated the example provided by Voloshinov, and gave it a Cassirerian interpretation, we would say that the hammer and sickle, as instruments of production, are representatives that started to point to “other meanings” (the proletariat, the struggle of classes, etc.), to another reality placed in relation (the represented). The symbolic is relational because the symbol is never “in itself”, but always “toward” something.

Yet, Voloshinov’s emphasis on ideology distances him from Cassirer. The difference between non-signal objects and symbolic products to Cassirer is put much more in anthropological and cultural terms: everything that belongs to the human world belongs to a symbolic reality, since man was prohibited from living a non-significant reality, a purely “natural” reality. In the Cassirerian view, “having meaning” already constitutes a process of symbolization.

To Voloshinov (1973), semiotic objects also need to “have meaning”. The meaning is, in effect, one of the aspects that defines the sign, which differentiates it from non-semiotic objects. This meaning, however, is always an “ideological” meaning, conditioned by the class struggle, as emphasized in *Marxism and philosophy of language*.

In the same way as we understand the Cassirerian concept of “symbol” from principles, we believe it is pertinent to undertake the same process to understand the concept of “sign” developed by Voloshinov. We can identify at least four key ideas from which the concept is formulated: representation, refraction, interaction, and material existence. With the *representation* discussed above, let us move on to refraction.

In addition to referring to the representation discussed previously, the idea that the sign “reflects and refracts another reality” (Vološinov, 1973, p. 10) presents itself as a means of “breaking” the mechanical causality of Marxism. In the introduction to *Marxism and philosophy of language*, Voloshinov (1973) argues that, at the time of publication of the work, the category of mechanical causality reigned in all areas

of science over ideology. That is, when discussing how the conditions of material production determine ideological productions, the answer given to this question by Marxism would be, in his understanding, “too vague”.

The author argues that this determination cannot be understood as something causal and mechanical, since ideological products present themselves as units, as “totalities” that react systematically to changes in the conditions of production. Thus, the appearance of the “superfluous man” in literature cannot be seen as a simple mechanical and causal reaction to shocks in social life. It is first necessary to consider that the novel as a whole and literature itself, as a sphere with its own means of refracting social life, undergo changes and react to these transformations in social life.

This thesis presented by Voloshinov (1973) seems to have received direct influence from Cassirer’s concept of “symbolic form”. In Cassirerian view, symbolic forms are structured as “units”, based on their own laws of symbolizing the real. When thinking about the “spheres” not in the idealism from which Cassirer is situated, but from Marxism, Voloshinov (1973) conceives that these spheres react to the socioeconomic conditions of production. However, there is no mechanical reaction between these same conditions, considering that the spheres, as “significant totalities”, refract the real based on their laws of functioning and their orientation in ideological life.

We highlight that the word “law” itself, in the sense of specific ways of ordering the real (or, in Voloshinov’s view, of “reflecting and refracting” the real), is used extensively in Cassirerian work, and employed sometimes by Voloshinov, and several times by Medvedev. Medvedev also conceives ideological objects as signifiers, reflectors, and refractors of existence (Bakhtin/Medvedev, 1985), and argues that ideological fields (art, science, morality, religion, etc.) are structured as “concrete totality” (Bakhtin/Medvedev, 1985). Medvedev (1985) presents and discusses, in more detail, the way in which the artistic structure in literary work is affected by the ideological horizon. The “superfluous man” does not appear in a causal and mechanical way in the work, without considering that this work, and all literature, react and transform based on social changes: “a novel figures and is active in social life precisely as a novel, as an artistic whole” (Bakhtin/Medvedev, 1985, p. 23).

Let us examine this idea of “refraction” in more detail (the sign reflects and refracts). First, refraction is a “solution” to Marxist causality, as we pointed out. Thus, it is considered that the different ideological spheres, having their own laws of refraction and orientation in reality, cannot simply mechanically reproduce the socioeconomic bases.

Second, the refraction of the sign can also be conceived as an “evaluative position”. When stating that the sign is part of a reality but “reflects and refracts another reality” (Vološinov, 1973, p. 10), Voloshinov adds that the sign is capable of distorting this refracted reality: “it may distort that reality or be true to it, or perceive it from a special point of view, and so forth”. (Vološinov, 1973, p. 10). In this excerpt, “refraction” is close to “point of view”, an evaluative position – the sign “refracts” because it does not simply reproduce (as it is) what is perceived, but actively “opposes” reality, as it evaluates from a certain point of view.

In volume I of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms*, we find a similar idea (safeguarding the distinct philosophical orientations), that is, the linguistic sign as an evaluative position. Let us examine the excerpt:

Language never simply follows the lead of impressions and perceptions, but confronts them with an independent action: it distinguishes, chooses and directs, and through this action creates certain centers of objective intuition. And because the world of sensory impressions is thus permeated with the inner measures of judgment, the theoretical nuances of signification and the affective nuances of value tend at first to shade off continuously into each other (Cassirer, 1985, p. 301).

In the excerpt above, the author discusses how the formation of grammatical gender occurs in languages. Note that the formation of concepts in language does not simply follow impressions and representations, often establishing itself based on a “position taking” in relation to what is perceived. Thus, in a footnote, Cassirer (1985, p. 301) presents an interesting example of a study carried out by Meinhof and Reinisch on the Beja language, used in Northeastern Sudan. In this language, feminine nouns represent that which is less important to the domestic economy. In the example, “cow”, which supports the economy, is a masculine word, while “meat” is feminine, because it is less important.

We highlight, however, that Cassirer addresses a type of “valuation” that occurs at even earlier levels of the semiotic process (that is, the formation of a grammatical category in the language), to argue that language, in its formation process, does not reproduce the reality, but rather “judges” this reality according to society’s ways of life. This “evaluated” reality then enters the sign order.

Another meaning for “semiotic refraction” presented by Voloshinov is “distortion”. The author questions what conditions the refraction in the sign, and he argues that this refraction is the result of the class struggle. He also argues that the ruling class tends to “accentuate yesterday’s truth as to make it appear today’s.” (Vološinov, 1973, p. 24) and “that is what is responsible for the refracting and distorting peculiarity of the ideological sign within the dominant ideology” (Vološinov, 1973, p. 24).

Faraco (2009) sees a contradiction in this idea of refraction. Faraco (2009) argues that, by conditioning the semiotic refraction to the class struggle, Voloshinov (1973) does not answer the question: considering that in Marxist doctrine, with the victory of the proletariat, the class struggle tends to disappear, would the sign then stop refracting the world? To Faraco (2009), the Bakhtinian vision, according to which signic refraction is conditioned by the saturation of values that permeate discourses, seems much more coherent than the idea of refraction resulting from a class struggle.

We agree with the observations made by Faraco (2009), highlighting, however, that this idea of “refraction”, presented by Voloshinov in *Marxism and philosophy of language* (Vološinov, 1973) seems to have some nuances of meaning (the idea of

“evaluative position” appears initially in the work) and would, in fact, be more coherent if it had not been conditioned by the class struggle.

Finally, we add – and here we make a very personal interpretation – that refraction, in a certain sense, corresponds to the creativity (“creativity” in the very sense of “creation”) of sign systems, as these systems are not mere reproducers of something externally apprehended (like a “mirror” that only reflects), but producers of meanings. Refraction leads to “new visions”, to new angles from which reality is made present.

Having discussed ideological refraction, let us move on to material existence.

Voloshinov (1973, p. 11) argues that the sign has a material character, that is, ideological semiotic phenomena “has some kind of material embodiment, whether in sound, physical mass, color, movements of the body, or the like”. Being given in a concrete material, the reality of the sign would then, in his words, be “fully objective” (Vološinov, 1973, p. 11), submitting to the monistic method of study. By defining material existence in this way, the Russian philosopher fits semiotic phenomena into the methods of Marxist analysis.

Voloshinov (1973) also adds that signs are phenomena of the external world. That is, they do not occur “in the mind”, in the “consciousness” of individuals; they are coated with their own objective materiality and result from socially organized interaction. By highlighting that signs occur in external experience, the author opposes idealist philosophy and cultural studies of a psychological nature, which, in his words, “locate ideology in the consciousness” (Vološinov, 1973, p. 11). It is necessary to highlight, however, what Voloshinov (1973, p. 11) states in a footnote: “It should be noted that a change of outlook in this regard can be detected in modern neo-Kantianism”. The author cites *The Philosophy of symbolic forms* as this “change” in idealist philosophy. According to Voloshinov (1973, p. 11), Cassirer considers representation as its main feature without abandoning the realm of consciousness. He adds: “According to Cassirer, an idea is just as sensory as matter; the sensoriness involved, however, is that of”. (Vološinov, 1973, p. 11).

In fact, as we pointed out above, *representation* is an essential feature of Cassirerian symbolism. This idea is also one of the essential and defining features of the concept of “sign” presented by Voloshinov, “representation” being understood as the pointing outside of self of sign/symbolic systems; therefore, the ability to transcend the “here-now” of mere signaling and to correlate other realities.

We also consider that, as discussed previously, Cassirer argues that the sign necessarily has a material substrate; it needs to “materialize” in order to realize the full potential of consciousness. These theses (the representation and realization of the sign in an objective sensuous substratum) seem to have influenced the writings of Voloshinov (1973).

The way the authors discuss this material existence is different, though. Voloshinov does not dwell so much on the ways in which semiotic material performs ideological meanings, limiting himself to “listing” different “materialities” (sound, physical mass, color, etc.). The author then defends the primacy of verbal signs in relation to other



semiotic systems, considering language the ideological sign *par excellence*, due to the ability that language has to move between all spheres, as well as “translate” other semiotic systems.

Cassirer does not exactly consider language a symbolic system with primacy in relation to other symbolic forms (myth, science, art, etc.), and, unlike Voloshinov, highlights the ways in which sensuous substratum interrelates with intelligible data, thus substantiating the thesis of “symbolic function” (expression, representation and meaning)<sup>4</sup>.

Another prominent point in Voloshinov’s (1973) theoretical construct regarding the sign concerns *interaction*. In effect, this interaction is, as Grillo (2017) argues, Voloshinov’s great “synthesis”. In opposition to idealism, the Russian author argues that consciousness itself is performed only in some semiotic material and thus, we always go from a semiotic, and therefore material, link to another link that is also semiotic. Voloshinov argues that the sign emerges in a process of interaction between consciousnesses, in an *interindividual* terrain, in a socially organized group.

The interaction between a socially organized group is the element that defines the sign genesis itself and, therefore, the basic semiotic processes. Voloshinov (1973) states that the sign has a form and a content. Semiotic forms are conditioned both by the social organization of individuals and by their closest conditions of interaction. The author is emphatic: “When these forms change, so does sign” (Volóchinov, 1973, p. 23). Content is also a product of the ways of life and interaction of a social group, more specifically of the evaluative emphasis that each group gives to certain objects at a given time.

The sign genesis – and therefore the genesis of the “cultural world” – for Voloshinov, is linked to an evaluative element. The author questions what determines the valuation of a certain set of objects and then states that the relationship with the socioeconomic premises that are essential for the existence of a group gives the semiotic seal to that set of objects. Finally, he highlights that individual will cannot be important in this “sign genesis”, since the sign is the result of *social interactions* between organized groups.

In summary, when presenting his concept of “sign”, Voloshinov (1973) seeks to overcome neo-Kantian idealism – which locates meaning in consciousness – and Marxism – which defends a mechanical and causal relationship between socioeconomic bases and ideological products. The sign is a material, concrete, interindividual medium, the result of the interaction between socially organized groups, which reflects and refracts certain conditions of existence.

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<sup>4</sup> As we stated, by “symbolic function” Cassirer understands the ways in which the representative and the represented interrelate. The expression is characterized by the non-differentiation between the representative and the represented. Myth tends to this function, because in this symbolic form the deified or demonized image, for example, is often taken for the very being it represents. In representation, there is a distinction between the representative and the represented and the linguistic sign is an example of this function. Finally, in the symbolic function of signification, there is an independence of the meaning in relation to the sign. Science (especially exact sciences) is a symbolic form that tends towards pure meaning.

It should be noted that Voloshinov's initial discussions about the sign constitute the foundations of his theory. However, the author's object of analysis is not exactly the "sign" as such, since we do not communicate based on isolated signs, but based on signs concretely structured in *utterances*; the utterance is, in fact, the material of analysis of the Russian author.

Likewise, in the opening chapter of his *Philosophy of symbolic forms*, Cassirer (1980) presents the concepts of symbol and sign and discusses the premises of symbolism in the objectification of reality. However, his object of study resides not in the isolated symbolic sign, but in symbolic forms, which can be understood as systems of signs that produce certain world formations.

## Final considerations

In the introduction of this article, we proposed the objective of comparatively analyzing the concepts of "symbol/sign" developed by Cassirer and the concept of "sign" proposed by Voloshinov, pointing out similarities, differences, and possible influences of Cassirer on Voloshinov.

Our path of analysis was guided by the search for "principles" or "key concepts" that could synthesize the aforementioned concepts. Thus, to understand the Cassirerian symbol – and by extension, the sign – we find the principles of creation as opposed to the mere reproduction of the world; the elevation of the individual to the universally valid; the sensitive-intelligible interrelationship; the representation. The concept of sign developed by Voloshinov, in turn, could be understood based on representation, refraction, interaction and material existence.

We highlight that the idea defended by Voloshinov that the sign character is the common "trace" that unites the different spheres (religion, art, politics, etc.) is directly influenced by Cassirerian theses. Also, the *representation* of semiotic systems, understood as the "pointing outside of one's self" of the concrete sign, which correlates at least two realities, is influenced by Cassirer's premises.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight that the differences between the two authors, in addition to their evident distinct philosophical orientations, are found in the contexts of production and in the problems to which the two authors respond. As we point out in this article, the formulating context of *The Philosophy of symbolic forms* is the context of overcoming the matter-form dualism within the idealist theme (Porta, 2011). According to Grillo (2017, p. 52), Voloshinov's intellectual context is that of overcoming, through a "dialectical synthesis", between neo-Kantian idealism and Marxist Sociology. Grillo (2017) relies on Tihanov (2002) to show how there were efforts to bring Kantianism and Marxism together in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, although the concept of "sign" presented by Voloshinov is influenced by Cassirerian theses, the Russian author expands these ideas based on the dialogue he has with the debates of his time.

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- **RESUMO:** *Nos últimos anos, muitos estudos têm sido publicados sobre as influências e convergências entre o pensamento do chamado “Círculo de Bakhtin” e de outros autores contemporâneos dos pensadores russos M. Bakhtin, P. Medviédev e V. Volóchinov. Diversos pesquisadores (Brandist, 1997, 2002, 2012; Poole, 1998; Lofts, 2000, 2016; Tihanov, 2002; Faraco, 2009; Grillo, 2017; Marchezan, 2019) têm, nesse sentido, mostrado algumas convergências entre o pensamento do filósofo alemão Ernst Cassirer e o pensamento dos autores russos supracitados, bem como influências que aquele exerceu sobre o constructo teórico destes. Neste artigo, propomos, portanto, uma análise comparativa entre conceitos de “símbolo/signo” desenvolvidos por Cassirer e o conceito de “signo” delineado por Volóchinov, apontando similaridades, diferenças e possíveis influências daquele autor sobre este. Nosso caminho de análise pauta-se na busca por “princípios” ou “conceitos-chave” que possam sintetizar os conceitos supracitados. Concluimos que a ideia, defendida por Volóchinov, de que as diferentes esferas sociais (religião, arte, política etc.) vinculam-se por seu substrato signico sofre influência direta das teses cassirerianas. Também, a representação dos sistemas signicos, entendida como o “apontar para fora de si” do signo concreto, que correlaciona pelo menos duas realidades, recebe influência das premissas de Cassirer.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Signo; Marxismo e Filosofia da Linguagem; Filosofia das Formas Simbólicas.*

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